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SURPRISE -- THE KEY TO VICTORY ?

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7 October 1974

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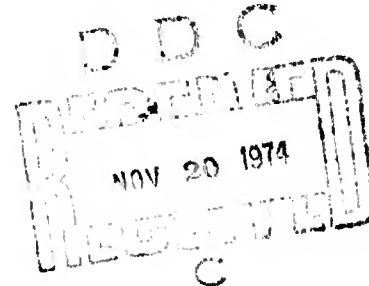
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**SURPRISE -- THE KEY TO VICTORY?**

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## SURPRISE -- THE KEY TO VICTORY?

Throughout the history of warfare, adherence to the basic principles of war has meant success in battle while failure to follow one or more of these principles has invariably led to defeat. The relative importance of the various principles has varied as tactics and weapons of war evolved. The principle of mass and massed formations were critical elements of tactics for centuries until the advent of the machine gun and area-type artillery made massed formations an invitation to disaster. But the principle itself still remains valid today, although in a different context. One principle that has retained its importance throughout the ages is surprise. An analysis will be made of the effect of surprise in future warfare in an attempt to determine if surprise could, in fact, be the key to victory in a future major conflict involving the three great powers in the world today: the United States, the Soviet Union, or Red China.

### THE PRINCIPLE OF SURPRISE

When Clausewitz set down his principles of war in his famous writing On War, he had this to say about surprise:

The surprise is, therefore, the medium to numerical superiority; but it is also to be regarded as a substantive principle in itself, on account of its morale effect. When it is successful in a high degree, confusion and broken courage in the enemy ranks are the consequences, and of the degree to which these multiply a success, there are examples enough. 1

Jomini also recognized the importance of surprise and in his Treatise On The Grand Military Operations stated: "It is usually not enough to attack at a given point with a numerical superiority if the enemy is sure you are going to attack there at that time. You must as far as possible surprise the enemy?" All great military commanders from Ceasar and Napoleon to Eisenhower and McArthur have understood and employed surprise as well as the other principles of war in their operations. In the past, surprise has been the vital factor in various battles and wars; but in other cases factors such as the total number of troops, comparable ability of the commanders, and the capability to live off the land have played equally decisive roles in determining the final outcome.

#### STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WARFARE

In discussing a major conflict involving the United States, Russia, or Red China, it must be recognized that each nation now or soon will possess strategic intercontinental ballistic missiles with megaton nuclear warheads that can be launched without warning and which will arrive on target in a matter of minutes. The ultimate effect of such a surprise attack depends to a large degree on the ability of the attacked nation to retaliate. Both the United States and Russia have placed great emphasis on the development of a second strike capability. However, it is hoped that any nation which possesses nuclear weapons also appreciates the consequences of a nuclear war and would be extremely reluctant to launch a nuclear attack in view of the virtual certainty of massive retaliation.

The most logical scenario for a future war then, is a non-nuclear attack launched by one of the major powers against one or the other of its principal adversaries or against one of their allies. This discussion will concentrate on the effect of surprise on the outcome of a conventional attack by one of the three major powers.

#### TACTICS AND DOCTRINE

Before attempting to evaluate the effect of surprise on the outcome of a war, the tactics and doctrine of the various nations must be examined to see how each views the use of surprise. There is little written information available on Red Chinese tactics and doctrine. However, we have vivid examples of their use of surprise in the attacks on UN forces in Korea in November 1950 and on India in October 1962. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Red China appreciates and understands the value of surprise in modern warfare.

On the other hand, much documentation is available about the tactics and doctrine of the Soviet Union. Prior to 1955, the Soviets followed doctrine that developed during World War II. During this period, they considered that surprise was a poor foundation to base hopes for a victory. Therefore, the expectation that surprise could be achieved was not appropriate justification for launching an attack on a major opponent.<sup>3</sup> In the spring of 1955 this view was replaced by a new estimate that recognized technological advances had occurred which enhanced the element of surprise and now made a surprise attack particularly dangerous to the Soviet Union. This new estimate also acknowledged that under circumstances surprise could play a decisive

role in determining not only the outcome of battles but of an entire war.<sup>4</sup> Tank Marshal Rotmistrov espoused this new view in

Military Thought:

The experience of history has shown that the skillful employment of surprise brings true success, not only in battles and operations but also in war. If war starts with a surprise attack, then as a rule it (the surprise attack) essentially determines the strategic victory in the first stages of the war and secures the conditions for the advantageous development of subsequent military activities.<sup>5</sup>

Writing in Red Star in November 1969, General Major Reznichenko expressed his view of the value of surprise and how it could be achieved:

Surprise is the most important principle of the military art that causes the achievement of victory during the course of combat operations. ...it can be achieved by leading the enemy into error about one's intentions, by perceiving in secret the plans for the forthcoming combat operations and preparations for them, by (carrying out) swift maneuvers and strikes at places where he least expects them...secretiveness is especially important...<sup>6</sup>

United States tactics and doctrine continually stress the need for surprise in combat operations. FM 100-5 states:

Surprise can decisively shift the balance of combat power. By surprise, success out of proportion to the effort expended may be obtained. Surprise results from striking the enemy at a time and place and in a manner for which he is unprepared. It is not essential that the enemy be taken unaware, but only that he becomes aware too late to react effectively.<sup>7</sup>

The necessity for and value of surprise in planning combat operations receives considerable emphasis in service schools. American history is filled with examples where surprise played a significant role in

the outcome of the battle. Washington's crossing of the Delaware River and his subsequent victory over the Hessians at Trenton, the timing and location of the Normandy invasion in World War II, and McArthur's landing at Inchon in September 1950 are but a few of the successful surprise attacks launched by american commanders. General Eisenhower considered both tactical and strategic surprise to be critical elements in developing battle plans:

To this end nothing is so useful as the attainment of strategic surprise; a surprise that suddenly places our own forces in a position to threaten the enemies ability to continue the war, at least in an important area. This effect is heightened when accompanied by the tactical surprise that arouses fear in the enemies front line troops that they are about to be destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

#### ACHIEVEMENT OF SURPRISE

One view of how surprise can be obtained was presented by General Reznichenko. In most instances, a period of rising tensions or deteriorating relations between the nations involved will precede the outbreak of hostilities. During such periods, efforts to settle the dispute by diplomatic means may be used to hide or mask preparations for a surprise attack. A prime example of this tactic was the negotiations used by the Japanese up to the very moment of the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Another means to hide the timing, scope, or direction of an attack is to stage maneuvers or exercises near the area of the projected attack. The Warsaw Pact used a series of military maneuvers starting in March 1968 in East Germany near the Czechoslovak border to develop command techniques, conduct a

logistical build up, and screen the mobilization and deployment of its troops.<sup>9</sup> On the night of 20-21 August 1968, troops from five Warsaw Pact nations conducted a combined air and ground invasion of Czechoslovakia using contingency plans that had been exercised during the maneuvers in June and July.<sup>10</sup> The Soviets, in a surprise lightning stroke, gained complete control of Czechoslovakia and reinstalled a pro-Soviet government in a period of about 24 hours. Any intervention by the Western Allies would then have required an attack on a major Soviet force firmly entrenched in support of a "legal" communist government.

In addition to techniques such as these, the inherent closed society of communist nations makes hiding preparations for a surprise attack much easier. Conversely the relatively open societies of the Western World makes concealment of attack preparations a more difficult task. For example, the assembly of a task force for the possible invasion of Cuba during the missile crisis of 1962 was rather widely known throughout the United States and presumably to the Soviet Union. Contrast this with the almost complete surprise the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia achieved.

#### TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

Relatively new technologies such as manned and unmanned high flying photographic aircraft, satellite photography, sophisticated sensor systems have made the problem of concealing a force build up a much more difficult task. Regardless of how exotic the intelligence systems become, the key to the usefulness of these new tech-

nologies continues to be the ability to interpret the information they provide. During the Korean War, the United States had many indications of a possible Red Chinese attack. Despite information through the Indian Embassy that the Red Chinese would intervene if UN troops crossed the 38th Parallel, General McArthur reportedly told President Truman on 15 October that Chinese intervention was not probable. Even the capture of Chinese prisoners from several different units in North Korea in late October and early November failed to convince US intelligence experts of possible Chinese intervention.<sup>11</sup> These misinterpretation were disastrous to the United Nations forces as over 200,000 Red Chinese troops struck in late November 1950, and ultimately led to the stalemate which still exists in Korea. With even more sophisticated intelligence gathering means, the United States failed to anticipate the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 or the Arab attack on Israel in 1973. Despite these intelligence failures, it is difficult to conceive that todays sophisticated intelligence data collection systems would fail to detect a conventional attack by either of the communist countries on the continental United States or an attack by the United States on the homeland of either of the communist powers. A somewhat higher probability exists for a successful surprise attack by either Russia or China along their mutual border in Asia since troop movements of national forces inside its own borders are more difficult to detect and correctly interpret.

#### HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

History is replete with examples of successful surprise attacks which led to further victories and probably an equal number of instances where the surprise attack was not fully exploited. In order to evaluate the potential effects of surprise on the outcome of a future war, two recent examples from the same geographical area will be examined. In both cases initial surprise was achieved, but the final results were vastly different.

In 1967, continued Egyptian pressure against Israel made war a foregone conclusion. Israel realized her only chance against the massed Arab forces which surrounded her on all sides lay in a surprise attack to seize the initiative. She hoped her plight would generate sufficient sympathy in Washington to counteract any repercussions a preemptive strike might arouse. At 0745 hours on 5 June, the Israeli Air Force launched the first of a series of air attacks on the Arab air fields and in a matter of a few hours completely destroyed Arab air power.<sup>12</sup> Israel now had complete domination of the skies and was able to use its aircraft to provide air cover and supplant artillery to support its highly mobile armored columns which operated from interior lines and moved virtually unopposed against the enemy on all fronts until the Israeli advances were stopped by a United Nations ceasefire. In virtually the same situation in 1973 the Arabs, still smarting from their 1967 defeat and resupplied and reequipted by the Soviet Union, were ready to try again. Despite knowledge that Egyptian forces had been practicing river crossing techniques and many indications that the Arab nations were massing their forces, Israel did not expect an immediate attack.

At the improbable time of 1400 hours, Egyptian and Syrian forces struck across the Suez Canal and on the Golan Heights in surprise attack on the Jewish high holyday of Yom Kippur. Initially the well planned and executed Arab attacks achieved great success, breaching the Bar Lev defense line in the Siani and driving Israeli forces from parts of the Golan Heights. But after these initial successes, the Arabs paused to regroup, resupply, and await further orders.<sup>13</sup> This permitted Israel time to mobilize its reserves and with the help of United States resupply, counterattack and regain the initiative. Israel recaptured the Golan Heights positions, drove toward Damascus and crossed the Suez Canal trapping a large part of the Egyptian Army in the Siani until big power intervention led to a United Nations ceasefire and prevented another decisive Israeli victory over its Arab enemies. In both wars initial surprise was achieved. In the Six Day war of 1967, Israeli initiative, flexibility, patriotism, and interior lines all aided in the final victory; but the key element in the smashing Israeli success was the surprise preemptive attack followed by her aggressive exploitation of the advantages gained from the surprise attack. In 1973, despite initial successes from their surprise attack, the Arab nations failed to exploit their advantage. Lack of leadership and imagination coupled with an inability to improvise, permitted Israel time to mobilize and regain the initiative. These shortcomings cost the Arabs a chance for a military victory that the initial surprise had given them.

### OBJECTIVES OF AN ATTACK

Thus it is possible to achieve both strategic and tactical surprise even in today's highly technical environment and surprise, if attained, can significantly effect the final outcome provided the attacker recognizes and makes plans to fully exploit his initial advantages. All three major powers recognize the implications of a surprise attack and can be expected to fully utilize it in any future war. What objectives or reasons would cause one of the major powers to consider an attack on another of the powers? Some potential objectives will be analyzed in light of the above factors concerning surprise to determine if a successful surprise attack could be the decisive factor in determining the final outcome of a war.

Possible objectives of all three powers can essentially be grouped as three options: an attack directly on the homeland of the opponent; an attack on an ally of one of the other powers; or, an attack on a third nation which one of the other powers considers as vital to its interests even though they are not formally allied.

It must be recognized that the ultimate aim of communism is to impose its concept of government on the rest of the world. Despite the current mode of detente, if either Russia or Red China believed that conditions were right, it would not hesitate to launch an invasion on the continental United States in order to take advantage of some internal unrest or upheaval. An attack by Russia is more likely since they have some potential close-in staging areas in Cuba and Siberia. An attack by Red China is far less likely but the possibility of a Chinese attack on Hawaii or a US possession such as

Guam must be considered.

The objectives of an invasion by the United States on Red China or Russia would probably be a preemptive attack to forestall either of the communist powers from attacking a US ally or some other nation friendly to or under the protection of the United States. The United States has several bases in close proximity to both communist powers from which an invasion could be staged and launched.

Either of the two communist powers could decide to resolve their long standing dispute over their common border in Asia by a full scale invasion growing out of one of the series of border clashes which frequently occur.

Although a direct attack by one power on the homeland of another remains a possibility, a more likely scenario would involve an attack by one of the powers on a third nation which is directly allied with another power. Probably the most explosive situation in this regard lies in the Far East where a Red Chinese attack on Taiwan is a distinct possibility. Other potential trouble spots are South Korea and Japan. The possibilities for a Russian attack in Europe are innumerable considering the number of NATO nations, with a Warsaw Pact invasion of West Germany causing the most concern. The most likely objective for an attack by the United States would be Cuba although recent efforts to heal the breach make this less probable. Other possibilities include a NATO attack in Europe, or attacks in North Korea or North Vietnam. The Soviet Union and Red China could become involved in a war over a third nation where both

are vying for influence, such as North Korea or North Vietnam. A complicating factor in any attack on an ally of another major power is the possibility that the other power's forces would immediately become involved in the initial attack and fighting. The possibility of this occurring is highest in Europe where two of the major powers have substantial forces deployed in East and West Germany.

The third option involves an attack by one power on a third country not allied with another power but which that power considers vital to its interests or national security. For example, any attack by Red China or Russia on a Central or South American nation would be considered as a threat to the security of the United States and would undoubtedly bring an immediate and violent reaction from the United States. Similarly, an attack on Finland or Yugoslavia would probably elicit an equally violent response from Russia as would an attack on Burma or Hong Kong bring a response from Red China. Another possibility is a confrontation in an area in which two powers have conflicting interests such as the Middle East where the clashes between Israel and the Arabs have brought the US and USSR to the brink of war several times in the past quarter century.

#### EFFECT OF SURPRISE

Could one of the major powers successfully accomplish a surprise attack in any of the above situations? If so, what effect would the surprise attack have on the final outcome of the war?

Any one of the three powers contemplating a conventional attack on the homeland of another power is faced with tremendous

problems. Except in the case of a Russia-Chinese war, an invasion would require an amphibious landing preceded by a long distance sea move. At this time none of the major powers possess sufficient sealift to launch and sustain a major invasion at the great distances that would be involved.<sup>14</sup> Although bases close to potential target countries from which an invasion could be staged do exist, it would be extremely difficult for an attacker to conceal his invasion force or logistical build up from detection by one or more of the highly sophisticated intelligence gathering systems currently in operation. It would be easier for either Russia or China to assemble and launch an invasion across their mutual border, but this also would involve moving men and equipment over long distances and rough terrain. In any of these situations, even if the initial attack is successful, the attacker faces even more formidable problems as he progresses inland. He would have long supply lines to maintain as well as vast land masses to conquer and occupy; while the defender has the advantages of a large population fighting to protect the homeland coupled with a close industrial base and relatively short interior supply lines.

A limited objective attack by one power on a third nation poses a different situation. One can imagine a Russian attack on Yugoslavia, a Red Chinese attack on Taiwan, or an invasion of Cuba by the United States. In each of these situations the forces required by the attacker are relatively small and probably could be assembled without call-up of reserves. The attack would occur close to the homeland of the attacker and far from that of the major power ally. There may

or may not be a period of increased tensions and the build up probably could be covered by a maneuver near the objective area. For example, China has conducted many exercises opposite Taiwan and the United States has held maneuvers in the southeastern part of the country for years. In each of these cases, a well planned and executed surprise attack could put an invasion force ashore in sufficient strength to rapidly overwhelm the defenders and gain complete control of the target country before the other major power could react. However, the attacking force must be strong enough and must move decisively and rapidly to seize control of the situation in order to discourage intervention by a third power. If the initial assault does not involve an attack on troops of the protector nation and if his vital interests or security are not immediately threatened, the protector is faced with a difficult decision as to whether he is willing and able to commit his forces against a firmly entrenched attacker and risk escalation into a wider war that might involve his homeland. In the event China launched a surprise attack and rapidly secured Taiwan, would the United States send troops to recapture the island? If the US invaded and captured Cuba would Russia or Red China commit forces to dislodge US forces? I think not. On the other hand, an attack by the United States on East Germany would immediately involve Russian troops just as a Warsaw Pact attack on West Germany would involve US forces. The other major power would react immediately to any attack on their forces.

Many of the same considerations prevail in the case of an attack by one of the powers against a third nation not allied to another

major power. If the attack is located close to the homeland of the attacker and there is little immediate threat to the security of one of the powers, it would be extremely difficult for that major power to send forces a long distance to attempt to reverse an accomplished fact.

Consider the fact that no nation opposed Russia's bold and determined actions to put down revolts in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, or in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Similarly no nation actively opposed US intervention to prevent communist takeovers in Lebanon in 1958 or the Dominican Republic in 1965. The only recent incident that comes to mind where a major power did intervene at a time when another major force was in control of a third country occurred when Red China felt she could not tolerate a hostile force on her border and intervened in Korea in 1950.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In the foreseeable future, the limited objective attack by a major power against a third nation is far more likely than a direct invasion of the homeland of another major power. In order to avoid being surprised, a nation must use all the newly developed sophisticated intelligence systems to the maximum and must improve its ability to correctly interpret the information it gathers. Failure to do so will make a nation vulnerable to a surprise attack both on its homeland as well as on the homeland of its allies.

Under the conditions of a future non-nuclear war postulated earlier and the national objectives outlined above, it does not

appear that surprise, even if it could be achieved, would be the decisive element in a war resulting from an attack by one major power on the homeland of another. Although the attacker would accrue significant advantages from a successfully executed surprise attack, other factors such as the vast land areas involved, the will of the people to defend their homeland, industrial capability, and the long supply lines required by the attacker will probably have much greater impact on the final outcome than would the initial surprise attack.

On the other hand, a successfully executed surprise attack by one of the major powers on a third nation, regardless of whether the third nation is allied to or merely in the area of interest of another major power, could be a significant factor in determining the final outcome. Faced with an accomplished fact of a successful invasion of a country that does not involve his own forces or directly affects his national security, the other major power would be extremely reluctant to commit his forces against a well entrenched, determined major power established in a third nation. In such a case, surprise could well be the key to victory in any future war involving the United States, Russia, or Red China.

FOOTNOTES

1. Department of Military Art and Engineering USMA, Jomini.  
Clausewitz and Schlieffen, p.41.
2. Edward M Earle, Makers of Modern Strategy, p.88.
3. R. Garthoff, Soviet Strategy in a Nuclear War, p.85-86.
4. Arnold L. Horelick, Surprise Attack in Soviet Military Thought Since the 1955 Doctrinal Revision, p. iii.
5. H.S. Dinerstein, War and the Soviet Union, p.184
6. Albert Feui, Selections From the Soviet Military Press, p. 81.
7. US Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5, p. 5-2.
8. Gen. D.D. Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe, p.468.
9. John Erickson, Soviet Military Power, p. 94-95.
10. Phillip Windsor and Adam Roberts, Czechoslovakia-1968, p. 102.
11. BG Robert W Williams USA, "Surprise; The Danger Signals".  
Army, April 1974, p. 12-13.
12. Michael Howard and Robert Hunter, Israel and the Arab World-The Crisis of 1967, p.27.
13. Charles W Corddry, "The Yom Kippur War, 1973,-Lessons New and Old", National Defense, May-June 1974, p. 505-508.
14. Adm Thomas H Moorer, USN, "General Purpose Forces Compared",  
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(Detailed account of the events leading up to and during the Six Day War)
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